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Crises, January 22, 1987

Averting Failure, Risking Catastrophe

How do catastrophic failures of social policy come about? Detailed retrospective studies of the decision-making process that preceded such failures reveal with startling frequency one or both of two highly paradoxical characteristics of the policymaking:

a) Arguments for proposals, or analyses of a set of options, that totally fail to raise, or address, seemingly-obvious questions about one or more of the alternatives (such as the possibility of the catastrophic failure that does later occur, or of any potential failure at all, let alone any assessment of its probability or scale). Total lack of explicit consideration of what seem obviously critical concerns.

In particular, this commonly takes the form of arguments in favor of a given course--the one that comes to be chosen, eventually with catastrophic results--on the grounds that it is "necessary" to ultimate success of a larger policy, or to avert its failure: but with no estimate offered at all of its cost, or the likelihood of success if it is chosen--or if it is not, i.e. the difference it makes to the probability of success--or of the form or cost of failure of the proposed course.

This emerged in the documentation of the Pentagon Papers research so commonly as the form that proposals took, including winning proposals, that it is identified in my working notes as The Proposal Pattern, or the Desperate Proposal Pattern (since it was associated with the assertion that every course but the one recommended was certain to fail).

Most recently, it has been observed, with some astonishment, in the single decision-making document released by the White House that preceded, and allegedly determined, President Reagan's decision to send US arms directly to Iran (without Israeli intermediaries) in January, 1986, the memo by Admiral Poindexter (drafted by Lt. Colonel North) on which the President was briefed before he signed the recommended Finding of January 17, 1986 that authorized the venture.

As a number of Senators and other critics observed with great perplexity, the memo mentions possible risks (as being outweighed) and implicit reservations by the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense (who "do not recommend" the proposed course) without saying a word as to what these possible risks are, how likely they are to be realized and the consequences if they are, nor what it is about the policy to which the Secretaries object or why. The impression given by this memo is of inexplicably deficient argumentation or analysis, a "crazily" incomplete or reckless decision-making process, preceding (and perhaps causing) the President's fatal decision.

But in this case--as in most of the others--further investigation reveals that the considerations and risks totally omitted from the given document actually have been analysed elsewhere, and have even been brought authoritatively to the President's attention. (This does not eliminate the paradoxical nature of the fact that even one authoritative decision-making document should take a form so apparently deficient; but it reduces its causal significance in determining the decision).

Even before this Finding had been released, we had learned that Shultz and Weinberger had expressed to the President virtually all of the defects in the chosen course that have now materialized (except for the connection with funding for the contras, of which they were not aware and which may not yet have been conceived by North and Poindexter). I.e., they had predicted with considerable clarity and emphasis the scandal the President confronted after the Iranian arms shipments were disclosed by the Lebanese journal, which was bad enough even before the later revelation by Meese of the contra connection. Yet the President had overruled them.

This conforms to the second paradoxical pattern, which has turned up largely since the research on the Pentagon Papers. In particular, it emerges in the research by Larry Berman on the President's decision in July, 1965 to undertake open-ended escalation of US troop commitment to Vietnam. Using documents and interviews from White House sources, unavailable to the Pentagon Papers study, he found that not only Ball (as was already known) but McGeorge Bundy had argued cogently against this course, raising virtually all the questions and criticisms that later events proved to have been crucially relevant and making estimates that were strikingly realistic.

Opposition by Clark Clifford (in great contrast to portrayals of his position at this time) was equally vehement; like a number of Senators LBJ knew and trusted, he used the word "catastrophic" about the course McNamara proposed and the President accepted. (Bundy's characterization of this course--before the President adopted it--was "reckless to the point of folly." The Pentagon Papers--which lacked this document--present almost no case I can remember of language this strong about the proposal of another Cabinet-level official.)

Paradoxically, in the documentation available, the criticisms and estimates raised by foes of the proposal--which would seem to make an overwhelming case against it,

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